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THE POMAKS

General data on the language

Pomaks are those whose mother tongue is called Pomakika in Greece / Pomakci (name in their language); most linguists call that language Pomak and, sometimes, Bulgarian. The Pomak language belongs to the linguistic family of the Southern Slavic languages, and, within them, to the linguistic group of Bulgaro-Macedonian. There is no information on Pomak dialects. Although there is no written tradition, the appropriate alphabet to write the language is the Cyrillic. It is generally believed that Pomak is one of the various Bulgaro-Macedonian dialects which existed in the Southern Balkans before the emergence of modern nation-states and their corresponding literary languages.

Pomaks live in the three departments of Western Thrace: they are the main component of the Muslim (in fact today Turkish) minority in Xanthi. There have not been any official statistics since 1951 (and the preceding statistical data are not very trustworthy). The best estimate for the Pomaks today is a figure around 30,000. The Greek state gives an estimate of 35,000 (COMS, 1994); so do authors 'acceptable' to the Greek state: Hidioglou (1991:45) and Notaras (1994:47). The 30,000 estimate is based on a Greek Helsinki Monitor/Minority Rights Group-Greece detailed estimation, on the basis of the census data and the synthesis of the minority communities as provided by both the Greek authorities and local minority sources. It is also the estimate of Nakratzas (1988: 131) and De Jong (1994). Seyppel (1989:42) gives an estimate of 20,000-30,000.

Pomaks, along with Turks and Muslim Roma living in Thrace, are officially recognized as a religious Muslim minority, in accordance with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and formally enjoy the corresponding rights, though they have been treated as Turkish and not Pomak speakers by the authorities. So, there is no teaching of their language, despite the Treaty of Lausanne's guarantee of education in the Muslims' own language; this deficiency is admitted even by the official Greek authorities (COMS, 1994). Likewise, there is no teaching in Pomak, but it is sometimes used by teachers to explain some things orally to kindergarten and primary school pupils. If required, Pomak may be used in courts and interpreters will be provided, as this is guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne: nevertheless, Pomaks use Turkish in such occasions.

Western Thrace was first incorporated into Greece after World War I; its definite inclusion was the result of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). The latter also called for an exchange of population between Greece and Turkey: all

Muslims of Greece were to resettle in Turkey and all Orthodox of Turkey were to resettle in Greece. There were two exceptions: Muslims could stay in Thrace and Greeks in Istanbul (Constantinople in Greek), Gokceada (Imvros) and Bozcaada (Tenedos). The Muslims of Thrace were officially recognized as a minority, and had the rights to education in their own languages and to religious freedom. The Pomaks were officially recognized, therefore, as one component of the Muslim minority. Since 1951, Pomaks have been able to attend either Greek schools or Turkish schools. There have never been any Pomak schools, as, for the Greek state, Pomak is a language without a written form (COMS, 1994). Moreover, in the 1950s and 1960s, all minority schools and institutions were officially and compulsorily called Turkish rather than Muslim; the opposite went into effect in the late 1960s, under the junta, and has persisted ever since.

Pomaks are Muslims and their religious services are held in Arabic. Moreover, some distinct Pomak festivals in the Rodopi and Evros departments have been reported (COMS, 1994).

History of the community and the language

The historical origins of the Pomaks or Achrjani (as they also used to call themselves) are obscure (De Jong (1980: 95); moreover, very little is known about their evolution, even as recently as in the XIX century. This ignorance therefore provides a fertile ground for another controversy in the Balkans. As Bulgarians, Greeks and Turks all claim that Pomaks are a component of their respective nations or simply want to assimilate them (Sarides, 1987), they provide different 'national histories' (or perhaps 'national fictions') which usually 'devalue or ignore "disturbing" facts' (Seyppel, 1989: 43 & 48).

Greek authors consider Pomaks to be the descendants of ancient Thracian tribes which were in turn Hellenized, Latinized, Slavized, Christianized and finally Islamized. Those of them who stayed in the mountains succeeded in remaining 'pure' descendants of these ancient tribes and they have many Greek, if not Homeric, words in their vocabulary. Greeks even use anthropometric and 'blood-group' research to prove that Pomaks are very different from Turks and are similar to Greeks (Seyppel, 1989: 42; Sarides, 1987 and references therein; Hidirolou, 1991 and references therein). For Greeks, Pomak is a derivative of the Ancient Greek word 'Pomax' ('drinker') which reflects the Thracians' known habit of drinking; and Achrjani is a derivative of the ancient Thracian tribe of 'Agrianoi' (Seyppel, 1989: 48).

Bulgarian historians insist on the Pomak language, which is a variant of Bulgarian, albeit with some specific characteristics. This proves to them that Pomaks are Bulgarians who, probably in the XVII century, were forced to be Islamized; nevertheless, they remained crypto-Christians and have in fact preserved Bulgarian culture in its 'purest' form (Seyppel, 1989: 42; Sarides, 1987 and references therein; Hidirolou, 1991 and references therein). The Bulgarian view, in its basic elements, appears to be the most widely accepted

outside the area (Wilkinson, 1951:314-5; Poulton, 1993). For Bulgarians, 'Pomak' comes from either the Turkish term 'Pomagach' ('helper'), reflecting the social position of Pomaks in the Ottoman period, or from the Bulgarian 'Pomochamedanci' ('Islamized'); as for Achrjani, it is supposed to come from Old Bulgarian 'Aagarjani' ('infidels') (Seyppel, 1989: 47).

Finally, Turks base their arguments on the Muslim religion of the Pomaks. According to them, they are the descendants of various Turkish tribes (Pechenegs, Avars, Kumans) which established themselves in the Southern Balkans before the latter's conquest by the Ottomans. So, Pomaks are the oldest Turkish population in Europe and, perhaps, 'pure-blooded' Turks (Seyppel, 1989: 42; Sarides, 1987 and references therein; Hidiroglou, 1991 and references therein). The word Pomak, in this version, comes from Turkish 'Pomagach' ('helper') and Achrjani from the Persian word 'Ahiyan' (the known religious fraternities) (Seyppel, 1989: 48). Pomaks in Greece prefer to subscribe to the Turkish version of their origins, in accordance with the Turkish national identity they have developed in recent decades. On the other hand, Pomaks in Bulgaria (usually called Bulgarian Muslims) are divided: some have Bulgarian leanings, others Turkish leanings while others have a separate ethnic identity.

The Muslim Pomaks helped the Sultan crash the Bulgarian uprising in 1876, and subsequently disagreed with the San Stefano Treaty provisions which led to the stillborn Great Bulgaria: they revolted to create an autonomous administration which survived for many years, in some 20 localities in the Rhodope mountains (Dalegre, 1995: 123-38). Besides, in 1913, during the short-lived 'Republic of Gumuldjina' in Thrace, created after the retreat of Bulgarian and Ottoman troops, the Pomaks who had been forcefully Christianized by Bulgarians returned to their Muslim religion. Also, after World War I in 1918, eight Pomak deputies of the Bulgarian parliament had sent a memo to Greek leader E. Venizelos and the French delegation, asking for Greece's protection as a reaction to previous repeated efforts of the Bulgarians to fully assimilate them by Christianizing them, and eventually for Thrace's annexation to Greece; at the same time, the representatives of the Turkish Committee of Gumuldjina petitioned to the Great Powers for Thrace's autonomy, while other Pomaks favored Thrace to remain Bulgarian (Dalegre, 1995: 168-71; Divani, 1995: 60 -the latter omits the pro-Bulgarian petition); likewise, a Pomak delegation from Greece and Bulgaria made similar claims after World War II (Dalegre, 1995: 198-9; Sarides, 1987).

After 1923, Pomaks who lived in Greece outside Thrace had to resettle in Turkey because they were exchanged as Muslims in accordance with the Treaty of Lausanne. Only Pomaks in Thrace were exempted from this mandatory exchange of populations and stayed in Greece: they subsequently were among the most stringent opponents of the Kemalist reforms in Turkey, and therefore of the links between the Muslim minority in Thrace and the secular Turkish state.

During World War II, Bulgarians once again implemented a Bulgarization campaign among Pomaks, with some collaboration of the latter; as a consequence, the post-war Greek governments, from the time of the Civil War on, suspected the Pomaks of being the fifth column of communist Bulgaria; hence both the restricted military zone introduced in their mountain villages and the decision to send Pomak children to Turkish language schools, in an effort to distance them from Bulgarians. It is probably for that reason that Greek authorities decreed in 1954 that all Muslim institutions change their names to Turkish, as Turkey at the time was a trusted NATO ally in the Cold War era; fifteen years later, the military junta reversed Greek policy, in essence banning the word Turkish and substituting the word Muslim for it (Sarides, 1987). The post-1974 democratic Greek state has been upholding that ruling; but Pomaks have by now acquired a solid Turkish national identity and such measures can only aggravate the tensions and the feeling of discrimination among them.

Current situation of the community and the language

Through the end of 1995, most Pomaks lived in a military "restricted zone", access to which required a special permission, hardly ever granted to foreigners and therefore to foreign scholars (Seyppel, 1989:44). The zone was abolished in November 1995. The inhabitants of the villages within the zone have had special identity cards which restrict their freedom of movement within the limits of the department (within 30 km from their village through 1992): to travel or resettle further away, they too need a permit from the authorities, although this provision appears not to be strictly enforced (Dimitras, 1991:78; & 1994:21-2). These special measures were not abolished in November 1995.

Pomaks identify themselves with the Turks and, in the presence of outsiders, would even change the language of communication among themselves from Pomak into Turkish (Seyppel, 1989:47; Frangopoulos, 1990:90; Dimitras, 1991:77). Most Pomaks have today a double identity: an ethnic Pomak and a national Turkish one (see Dede, 1994:13). This assimilation into the Turkish nation was certainly helped by the Greek state's decision, in 1951, to introduce Turkish-language education for Pomaks in an effort to distance them from Bulgarians. But, it is believed that the main reason for the Muslim minority's homogenization has been the Pomaks' feeling that through their identification with Turks they would no longer be a minority into a minority, or have no one to defend their rights.

Some Pomaks go as far as denying the existence of an ethnic Pomak identity, just like some Arvanites, Vlachs, or Macedonians deny the existence of a separate ethnic identity besides their Greek national identity. Moreover, they hear with incredulity that their language can be written, believing that such efforts are aiming at distancing them from Turks (Frangopoulos, 1988:4).

So, there is no distinct Pomak leadership today: the community's leaders form part of the Turkish minority leadership and defend Pomak interests as Turkish interests (Sarides, 1987). Pomaks, Turks and Muslim Roma in Thrace face many problems of discrimination from Greek authorities and a growing hostility from Greek public opinion (Helsinki Watch, 1990; Dimitras, 1991 & 1994). The persistent refusal of Greek authorities to respond to the minority's demands led to a radicalization of the minority's attitude, reflected also in the emergence since 1985 of independent minority candidates who have been receiving the majority of Muslim votes. Pomaks are also resenting the new effort of Greek authorities, evident since 1994, to attempt to dissociate them from the Turks and to give -at least to the most cooperating among- them some privileges, like access to higher education institutions or to officer rank during their military service: when Pomak leaders protest and remind that they have a Turkish national or ethnic identity, they become the object of violent, often insulting, attacks by Greek media (like Kathimerini) and political leaders (like the Parliament's Speaker Apostolos Kaklamanis).

In education, the Pomak language has never been included in the educational curricula of the modern Greek state, but it is used as a means of communication among pupils at schools and, at the kindergarten and elementary level, sometimes by teachers. Otherwise, Pomaks attend the same schools with Turks and Muslim Roma in Thrace. According to Greek authorities, in 1994, for the whole Muslim (indeed Turkish) community, there were 231 Muslim elementary schools with 8,591 pupils and two minority secondary schools plus two Muslim seminars with 511 students: the secondary schools are obviously insufficient for the needs of the community, which is thus discouraged to send the children beyond primary school, although, according to Greek law, education is mandatory through the third year of secondary school. Many Pomak families, just like many Turkish families, therefore choose to send their children to schools in Turkey. Moreover, there is hardly any use of the language towards the authorities and in public services: in theory, Pomaks are allowed to address them in their language, through interpreters, but, as most speak Greek, they hardly ever opt to do it.

Today, most Pomaks are fluent in Turkish (the language of their education and the dominant language within the broad Muslim community), understand some Arabic (the language of the Koran) and can also speak Greek (a language they use to communicate with Greeks and Greek authorities). In the mountain villages, most speak Pomak at home; their language does not seem to be severely threatened with extinction and its use is not systematically discouraged by Greek authorities; nevertheless, as Pomaks identify with Turks, there is a tendency among the latter to discourage the use of Pomak, so as to achieve a better homogenization (i.e. Turkification) of the Muslim minority. Moreover, it appears that there is a slow decline in the use of the language among younger generations (De Jong, 1994). There are no studies on language use comparable to the ones for the other linguistic

communities whose languages are not used at schools (Arvanites, Vlachs, Macedonians).

Finally, although Pomaks live on the other side of the Greek-Bulgarian frontier too, there are very few transfrontier contacts: in fact, since the beginning of the Cold War, border crossings to Bulgaria have been closed in the two departments with significant Pomak populations (Xanthi and Rodopi), as Greek authorities wanted to avoid Bulgarian infiltration of the Pomaks of Greece. In late 1995, Greece and Bulgaria agreed to reopen these crossings. Their closing was one reason why most Pomak villages had since then been included in restricted military zones, with special permits been required to enter in or leave from these zones, even through 1994.